



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Hungarian Rhapsody (Magyar Rapszodia) by Miklós Jancsó
Karen Jaehne

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REVIEWS

events that could only stem from a belief in the possibility of affecting a balance between collective and individual action.

As the subjective section of the film nears its end, István's commitment to the revolution coheres, and events in this dream world reflect his change of attitude. Hence, no mist precedes the commander's fantasy of his own shooting as this seems as much a possibility in the coming struggle as Mari's own death. The solitary hang gliders, symbols of directionless bourgeois individualism, are replaced by the liberating paratroopers whose definite direction and purpose unite with the new faith István expresses by waving them on. István's embrace of Mari is the quintessential form of his decision since Mari is the film's personification of collectivism as well as an individual woman.

In the last shot, back to reality, we see István stand before the camera and scrutinize his surroundings. Unlike his puzzled aspect in the third shot, here István wears a look of assurance. Bartók's piano piece—the same piece contained in the earlier *Cantata* and *Elektreia*, which has become for Jancsó something of a victory march of the proletariat—plays again, but at this point in the film there is an underlying unity between music and image: Bartók's first music to assimilate folk influences and István's own assimilation into the peasant movement. As this is the second film of a projected trilogy (the first, *Hungarian Rhapsody*, has not yet been shown in this country), we await the next film to see how István carries out his resolve.

Allegro Barbaro is a remarkable accomplishment. The dream structure is one of many challenges in the film. A seemingly infinite variety of invention only begins to become apparent on subsequent viewings. The film's formal rigor is stunning. Like István, Jancsó has recognized the need to temper the collective (montage) with the individual (shot). While he may still have some distance to cover before he attains a true balance, the Hungarian director has discovered a new, unique, dynamic relationship between montage and *mise en scene*, and in doing so has infused a much needed vitality into contemporary cinema.

—WILLIAM KELLY



ALLEGRO BARBARO: István about to greet the liberating paratroopers. Photo: MOMA

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

(Magyar Rapszodia) Director: Miklós Jancsó. Screenplay: Gyula Hernádi, Miklós Jancsó. Photography: János Kende. Editor: Zsuzsa Csakany.

Since Miklós Jancsó won a golden palm for directing *Red Psalm*, he has become the choreographer laureate of Hungarian history. With two installments of a trilogy (unlikely to be completed), he has paid homage to two of his countrymen who both tried to find in the countryside solid founda-

tions and concrete images for a truly national musical idiom. Although Jancsó's idiom is visual, he is not unlike Ferenc Liszt and Béla Bartók in his virtuosity. *Hungarian Rhapsody*, an obvious homage to Liszt, seems at the moment to be fated to critical exile and ignored by official Hungarian cultural policy, while *Allegro Barbaro* is promoted as a "work of art." At the Cannes festival the two were called *Rhapsodie Hongroise*, Parts I and II. Jancsó and Hernádi did not originally conceive of their project as a trilogy, but the story proved to be too long for a single feature, and thus the reconstruction of the life of a single young man became the centrifugal force of this historical cycle.

André Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was the son of a minor aristocrat. In 1911 he assassinated the leader of the peasants' party and became an officer of the Hussars and sometime hero. After the fall of the monarchy, he joined Horthy and rallied round the counter-revolution, providing (along with his brother) leadership for the White Terror. Through the twenties, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky became increasingly alienated from his cohorts, in particular from those bourgeois who formed a kind of fraternity devoted to the esthetics of violence. Developing an antipathy to the Teutonic model, he opposed Hitler and the fascists, but, primarily, anything and everything Germanic. He committed himself to the struggle for independence in Hungarian political life and to a policy which incorporated the peasants and united them into a radical political party. Thus, when the Germans came to occupy Hungary in 1944, he helped lead the resistance movement, although his brother joined the Hungarian Nazi movement. At Christmas, 1944, the Hungarian Nazis hung André Bajcsy-Zsilinszky as the leader of the peasants—whose leader he himself had murdered some thirty years earlier. An avenue in Budapest has been named in honor of him, and Jancsó's film is a tribute at least as great.

Perhaps the planned trilogy is less tribute than tribunal, weighing the power of violence and beauty over the mind and the degree to which truth can obviate fact. Jancsó's rendition of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's history departs from that particular man's suffering and, as the saga of the character István Szadányi, becomes a controlling metaphor for Hungarian history. Jancsó firmly believes that

since realism (or *petit réalisme* as he called it), can be used to falsify history, an artist must invoke his right to imagine history or to recreate it on a theatrical level so that its appeal is to ultimate human truths rather than to the ever-disputed "facts" or official versions. Thus the prime minister in the film, Charles Hederváry, bears a historical name but the persona is taken from several different sources; in fact, his death is a total fiction—no Hungarian prime minister was assassinated late in the war, although the minister of the interior of a later 1949 Communist dictatorship was hanged.

A search for the historical relevancies in either film would be doomed to nit-picking questions of adaptation. Jancsó's gift being that of a choreographer, we would be well-advised instead to appreciate the mythic progression of his images into themes. *Hungarian Rhapsody* opens with a stylish family sequestered in a building—their house and home?—while outside, beyond them or their ken, a peasant celebration is underway; gendarmes arrive who hose down the entire gathering, presumably to get them under control. The young men of the family also become involved in this symbolic "baptism." Just as a dance cannot be characterized by a single pattern on the stage, or music in a single chord, the film refuses to yield such symbolic sequences to a list of particular equivalences.

Enemies identifiable by their uniforms, peasants portrayed in spotless white shirts, straight-haired maidens as sacrificial victims, repression and revolution in a symbiosis that insures each historical cataclysm its psychological purge: these are the images that Jancsó works with to render emotional histories of the Hungarians. In *Hungarian Rhapsody* a full assembly of peasants happily takes over a celebration beneath a scaffolding (resembling a barn-raising) in the second long sequence. These half-built structures—roofs supported by beams or, in the previous sequence, by white columns—help define the space Jancsó is claiming for his dance and serve as images of transformed structures throughout the film. For example, the columned house of the Zsadányi family will become the headquarters of an independent fascist elite, serve as a prison and training camp, and

come to be more of a pigsty than the spare wooden lines of the barn-like structure could ever afford. There is a later scene beneath the barn roof, which is a test of István's discipline: he is ordered to shoot his superior officer. Unable to respond, he is commanded to shoot his own horse, presumably because a cavalry officer without his mount is a contradiction in terms. He painfully shoots the beast, and its slow, painful death—the most realistic thing the camera records—remains an image of discipline as senseless violence.

As usual, Jancsó uses nudity as a celebration of humanism, providing his actors with the grace and anonymity of classical statuary. The human form as the measure of all things offers a cinematic barometer for the uses and abuses of power. It evokes an eroticism in whose presence we too feel naked, vulnerable, and therefore afraid. No matter how beautifully or peaceably juxtaposed, the contoured forms of the human body together with the meticulous uniforms of figures representing authority present such incompatible violence. The opening scene of *Hungarian Rhapsody* shows a naked girl cavorting politely with soldiers in a celebration more restrained than such circumstances would in all probability yield. A background voice asking, "Where have they gone, those who carried truth in their hearts and minds?" implies that such a golden age was and ever will be just as short-lived as this dangerous flirtation of skin and sword, flesh and leather.

Just as the imagist poets find natural objects adequate to express an intellectual/emotional complex (nature being just about as intellectual or emotional as anything has a right to be, as Ezra Pound has assured us), so Jancsó's best images often refer to nothing more than their own coexistence on the screen. For example, the candles burning on an easel upon which there hangs a mirror arrest ones attention, until the eye picks up the repetition of parallel lines from the candles to the columns supporting the family mansion in the background. This intellectual/emotional complex implies abstractions such as narcissism enshrined, social pillars transformed to wax, etc., and yet an abstraction is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain what Jancsó "means." Some images seem to yield more sense than others, be-

cause they are not peculiar to this work or even to Jancsó: a couple crouch in the shadow of a red sports car, her naked skin in as sharp a contrast to his uniform as the prancing horse on the other side of the automobile to the low, functional lines of the vehicle. Evocations of oppositions such as automation vs. nature or open vs. closed (defined) spaces can be observed by the alert critic. However, Jancsó's films are better appreciated as music or poetry for their mellifluous rhythms and surreal imagery than for their contributions to structuralism.

Occasionally, as over a tree's far-flung root, one stumbles over the plot-line, Jancsó and Her-nádi, in pursuit of the "secrets of history," hit upon recognizably universal truths in the dialogue punctuating the filmed catalogue of emotional reactions to revolution. In distinction to his detractors, Jancsó is not so naive as to believe that the struggle against authority is that of white-shirted peasants being trampled by a mounted gendarmerie, but the image has iconographic value for establishing what kind of cruelty inflicts enough resentment to generate revolution. The philosophies that have historically accompanied such icons are incorporated into the film's development in scenes where a fellow officer discharges a round on Jacobinism and its principles—the pursuit of order and revolution, as a woman flirts with István until he blurts out, "The aristocracy will always live in communism. The Reds want something that has always existed."

The self-serving nature of aristocracy is doubted by no one, least of all by Jancsó's supposed Hungarian audiences. In question is whether it perforce degenerates into the kind of decadence Jancsó portrays in a cavern where crystal, dancing, a baroque fountain, and candelabra provide the background for an assassination plot over dinner. This is a long sequence of light and shadow, as stylish artifice is posed and juxtaposed against the searching face of István, to whose despair the entire celebration erupts into Russian roulette. István stretches his lady's corpse onto a bench, as sprays of water drench the entire scene, bringing the imagery full circle back to the opening scene of the peasant fête. Here, however, the violence is not the collision of sadist and victim, but rather

the collusion of masochism and suicide often depicted as the last expensive thrill of a collapsing power structure. (Russian roulette has become a *beau geste* of late, with too many directors using it as a metaphor for finding meaning at five-to-one odds.)

If Jancsó seems enraptured with his own ceremonial recreation of peasant dance and plebeian prance, it can be seen as an appropriate and dignified response to a great ceremonial military tradition in Hungary, a country which even today maintains its position as the front-runner in the Olympic pentathlon, a sport demanding excellence in fencing, riding, shooting, and a stamina that comes only from rigorous training—in other words, from a way of life that reflects aristocratic virtues and values. Jancsó endows his aristocrats with these qualities and in both films shows the soldiers in constant training before the veranda of the house. It is interesting to note that after World War II, when cavalry became obsolete, there was an attempt to replace the riding event in the pentathlon with motor-cycling—the reaction to which was not unlike our own experience watching these machines circling around the yard in ugly imitation of Jancsó's previously mounted troops. Noblesse oblige seems unlikely to be a salient characteristic of an aristocracy stripped of its chargers.

In a final scene of *Hungarian Rhapsody*, the Prime Minister comes to command István to disband his private army, another feature of Hungarian life which is not beyond belief. Because the nobility had traditionally maintained small privately trained corps to be led in any grander Austro-Hungarian enterprise, it would not have been unusual in the thirties for the Zsadányi family to call up such a force on the assumption that they would need to fight to reestablish their hegemony over the upstart peasants.

For the philosophical underpinnings of aristocratic power-wielding, Jancsó allows a character speaking a fastidiously rhetorical German to deliver a tirade on madness and power: where power alone does not suffice, madness will find a way to establish total control . . . or something like that. Not only is the logic of this speech specious, but the German uttered by Udo Kier bears absolutely no relation to the subtitles I have seen. How subtitling

could ever so utterly and fallaciously steer another course remains as obscure as the character Udo Kier is portraying, one Alexander von Bülow, whose last name invokes a great Prussian military family of the nineteenth century. In response to questions about the fatal subtitling Jancsó, like Atlas, shrugged. Thus the first film strands us amid several riddles, unlikely to be soon solved.

—KAREN JAEHNE

JUST LIKE AT HOME

(Olyan Mint Otthon) Director: Marta Meszaros. Script: Ildiko Karody. Cinematography: Lajos Koltai. Produced by Hunnia Studio.

Just Like At Home, Hungarian director Marta Meszaros's eighth feature film, is a strangely beautiful, exquisitely complex work, full of ambiguity and mystery. What it concerns itself with is the emotional and sensual bond between a grown man and a ten-year-old girl.

If this theme sounds like it's been played out before in other man-girl films like *Lolita*, *Pretty Baby*, and *Paper Moon*, it is best to be warned that this film is nothing like them. There is none of the obvious nymphet sexuality of the first two, and none of that cute, gooey, life-is-but-a-dream comedy of the last. Meszaros's film is so subtly and naturally developed, so hidden and understated, and all played against a backdrop that is so grim and desperate, that it takes on a human realism that leaves all comparison with the other films by the wayside.

The work that immediately compares is Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* (see Michael Covino, "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness" *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1977-78). They have the same lonely father figure adopting the same isolated, spiritually abandoned little girl, and the same pervading sense of homesickness. Meszaros also shares Wenders's skepticism: the search for home only leads to a dead end. It is finally only the fragile relationship established by the man and girl that seems to count for anything—the true home at last.